

The Murder in Saltashe Wood

By Baroness Orczy

We called him "Skin o' My Tooth;" his friends, who were few; his clients, who were many; and I, his confidential clerk, solus—and very proud I am to hold that position. I believe as a matter of fact that his enemies—and their name is legion—call him Patrick Mulligan; but to us all who know him as he is, "Skin o' My Tooth," he always was, from the day that he got a verdict of "Not guilty" out of a jury who tried James Tovey, "the Dartmouth murderer." Tovey hadn't many teeth, but it was by the skin of those few molars of his that he escaped the gallows; no thanks to the pleading of his counsel, but all thanks to the evidence collected by Patrick Mulligan, his lawyer.

Of course, Skin o' My Tooth is totally unacquainted with the use of kid gloves. He works the best for his client; let the other side look to themselves, I say.

Funny-looking man, too, old Skin o' My Tooth—fat, and rosy and comfortable as an Irish pig, with a face as stodgy as a boiled currant dumpling. His hair, I believe, would be red if he gave it a chance at all, but he wears it cropped so close to his bulky head that he looks bald in some lights. Then, we all know that gentle smile of his, and that trick of casting down his eyes which gives him a look that is best described by the word "coy;" that trick is always a danger-signal to the other side.

Now, in the case of Edward Kelly, everyone will admit that that young man came nearer being hanged for murder than any of us would care for.

But this is how it all happened.

On Tuesday, September 3d, Mary Mills and John Craddock, who were walking through the Saltashe Woods, came across the body of a man lying near the pond, in a pool of blood. Mary, of course, screamed, and would have fled; but John, manfully conquering the feeling of sickness which threatened to overcome him, too, went up to the body to get a closer view of the face. To his horror he recognized Mr. Jeremiah Whadcoat, a well-known respectable resident of Pashet. The unfortunate man seemed to John Craddock to be quite dead; still he thought it best to dispatch Mary at once for Doctor Howden, and also to the police-station, while he, with really commendable courage, elected to remain beside the body alone.

It appears that about half an hour after Mary had left him, John thought he detected a slight movement of the rigid body, which he had propped up against his knee, and that the wounded man uttered a scarcely audible sigh and then murmured a few words. The young man bent forward eagerly, striving with all his might to catch what these words might be. According to his subsequent evidence before the coroner's jury, Mr. Whadcoat then opened his eyes, and murmured quite distinctly:

"The letter . . . Kelly . . . Edward . . . the other." After that all seemed over, for the face became more rigid and more ashen in color than before.

It was past six o'clock before the doctor and the inspector, with two constables and a stretcher from Pashet police station, appeared upon the scene and relieved John Craddock of his lonely watch. Mr. Whadcoat had not spoken again, and the doctor pronounced life to be extinct. The body was quietly removed to Mr. Whadcoat's house in Pashet. Mary Mills having already volunteered for the painful task of breaking the news to Miss Amelia, Mr. Whadcoat's sister, who lived with him.

The unfortunate man was cashier to Messrs. Kelly & Co., the great

wine merchants; so Mr. Kelly, of Saltashe Park, also Mr. Edward Kelly, of Wood Cottage, were apprised of the sad event.

At this stage the tragic affair seemed wrapped up in the most profound mystery. Mr. Jeremiah Whadcoat was not known to possess a single enemy, and he certainly was not sufficiently endowed with worldly wealth to tempt the highway robber. So far the police had found nothing on the scene of the crime which could lead to a clue—footsteps of every shape and size leading in every direction, a few empty cartridges here and there; all of which meant nothing, since Saltashe Woods are full of game, and both Mr. Kelly and Mr. Edward Kelly had had shooting parties within the last few days.

The public understood that permission had been obtained from Mr. Kelly to drag the pond, and, not knowing what to think or fear, it awaited the day of the inquest with eager excitement.

I believe that that inquest was one of the most memorable in the annals of a coroner's court. There was a large crowd, of course, for the little town of Pashet was a mass of seething curiosity.

The expert evidence of Dr. Howden, assisted by the divisional surgeon, was certainly very curious. Both learned gentlemen gave it as their opinion that the deceased met his death through the discharge of small shot fired from a gun at a distance of not more than a couple of yards. All the shot had lodged close together in the heart, and the flesh round the wound was slightly charred.

The police, on the other hand, had quite a tit-bit of sensation ready for the eager public. They had dragged the pond and had found the carcass of a dog. The beast had evidently been shot with the same gun which had ended poor Mr. Whadcoat's days, the divisional surgeon, who had examined the carcass, having pronounced the wound—which was in the side—to be exactly similar in character. A final blow dealt on the animal's head with the butt-end of the gun, however, had been the ultimate cause of its death. As the medical officer gave this sensational bit of evidence, a sudden and dead silence fell over all in that crowded court, for it had leaked out earlier in the day that the dead dog found in the pond was "Rags," Mr. Edward Kelly's well-known black retriever.

In the midst of that silence Miss Amelia Whadcoat—the sister of the deceased gentleman—stepped forward, dressed in deep black, and holding a letter, which she handed to the coroner.

"It came under cover, addressed to me," she explained, "on Tuesday evening."

The coroner, half in hesitation, turned the square envelope between his fingers. At last he read aloud:

"To the Coroner and Jury at the inquest, should a fatal accident occur to me this (Tuesday) afternoon, in Saltashe Wood."

Then he tore open the envelope. Immediately everyone noticed the look of boundless astonishment which spread over his face. There was a moment of breathless silent expectation among the crowd, while Miss Amelia stood quietly with her hands demurely folded over her gingham umbrella, and her swollen eyes fixed anxiously upon that letter.

At last the coroner, turning to the jury, said:

"Gentlemen, this letter is addressed to you as well as to myself. I am

therefore, bound to acquaint your minds to be unduly influenced, however strange these few words may seem to you. The letter is dated from Ivy Lodge, Pashet, Tuesday, September 3d, and signed Jeremiah Whadcoat. It says: 'Mr. Coroner and Gentlemen of the Jury:—I beg to inform you that on this day, at 2:30 P. M. I am starting to walk to Saltashe, there to see Mr. Kerhoet and Mr. Kelly on important business. Mr. Edward Kelly has desired me to meet him by the pond in Saltashe Woods, on my way. He knows of the business which takes me to Saltashe. He and I had a violent quarrel at the office on the subject last night, and he has every reason for wishing that I should never speak of it to Mr. Kelly and to Mr. Kerhoet. Last night he threatened to knock me down. If any serious accident happens to me, let Mr. Edward Kelly account for his actions.'"

A deadly silence followed, and then a muttered curse from somewhere among the crowd.

"This is damnable!" And Mr. Edward Kelly, young, good-looking, but, at this moment, as pale as death, pushed his way forward among the spectators.

He wanted to speak, but the coroner waved him aside in his most official manner, while Miss Amelia Whadcoat demurely concluded her evidence. Personally, she knew nothing of her brother's quarrel with Mr. Edward Kelly. She did not even know that he was going to Saltashe Woods on that fatal afternoon. Then she retired, and Mr. Edward Kelly was called.

Questioned by the coroner, he admitted the quarrel spoken of by the deceased, admitted meeting him by the pond in Saltashe Woods, but emphatically denied having the slightest ill-feeling against "Old Whadcoat," as he called him, and, above all, having the faintest desire for wishing to silence him forever.

"The whole thing is a ghastly mistake or weird joke," he declared firmly. "But the quarrel?" persisted the coroner.

"I don't deny it," retorted the young man. "It was the result of a preposterous accusation old Whadcoat saw fit to level against me."

"But why should you meet clandestinely in the woods?"

"It was not a clandestine meeting. I knew that he intended walking to Saltashe from Pashet through the woods; a road from my house cuts the direction which he would be bound to follow, exactly at right angles. I wished to speak to him, and it saved me a journey all the way to Pashet, or him one down to my house. I met him at half-past three. We had about fifteen minutes' talk; then I left him and went back home."

"What was he doing when you left him?" asked the coroner, with distinct sarcasm.

"He had sat down on a tree stump and was smoking his pipe!"

"You had your gun with you, of course, on this expedition through the woods?"

"I seldom go without my gun this time of year."

"Quite so," assented the coroner grimly. "But what about your dog, who was found with his head battered in, close to the very spot where lay the body of the deceased?"

"Poor old Rags strayed away that morning. I did not see him at all that day. He certainly was not with me when I went to meet old Whadcoat."

The rapidly spoken questions and

answers had been listened to by the public and the jury with breathless interest. No one uttered a sound, but all were watching that handsome young man, who seemed, with every word he uttered, to incriminate himself more and more. The quarrel, the assignation, the gun he was carrying—he denied nothing; but he did protest his innocence with all his might.

One or two people had heard the report of a gun while walking on one or other of the roads that skirt Saltashe Woods, but their evidence as to the precise hour was unfortunately rather vague. Reports of guns in Saltashe Woods are very frequent, and no one had taken particular notice. On the other hand, the only witness who had seen Mr. Edward Kelly entering the wood was not ready to swear whether he had his dog with him or not.

Though it has been fully expected ever since Jeremiah Whadcoat's posthumous epistle had been read, the verdict of "Wilful murder against Edward St. John Kelly" found the whole population of Pashet positively agast. Brother of Mr. Kelly, of Saltashe Park, the accused was one of the most popular figures in this part of Herfordshire. When his subsequent arrest became generally known in London, as well as in his own country, horror, amazement, and incredulity were quite universal.

The day after that memorable inquest and sensational arrest—namely, on the Saturday, I arrived at our dingy old office in Finsbury Square at about twelve o'clock, after I had seen to some business at Somerset House for my esteemed employer.

I found Skin o' My Tooth curled up in his armchair before a small fire—as the day was wet and cold—just like a great fat and frowsy dog. He waited until I had given him a full report of what I had been doing, then he said to me:

"I have just had a visit from Mr. Kelly of Saltashe Park."

I was not astonished. That case of murder in the Saltashe Woods was just one of those which inevitably drifted into the hands of Skin o' My Tooth. Though the whole aspect of it was remarkably clear, instinctively one sensed a mystery somewhere.

"I suppose, sir, that it was on Mr. Edward Kelly's behalf?"

"Your penetration, Muggins, my boy, surpasses human understanding." (My name is Alexander Stanislaus Mullins, but Skin o' My Tooth will have his little joke.)

"You are going to undertake the case, sir?"

"I am going to get Mr. Edward Kelly out of the hole his own stupidity has placed him in."

"It will be by the skin of his teeth if you do, sir; the evidence against him is positively crushing," I muttered.

"A miss is as good as a mile, where the hangman's rope is concerned, Muggins. But you had better call a hansom; we can go down to Pashet this afternoon. Edward Kelly is out on bail, and Mr. Kelly tells me that I shall find him at Wood Cottage. I must get out of him the history of his quarrel with the murdered man."

"Mr. Kelly did not know it?"

"Well, anyway, he seemed to think it best that the accused should tell me his own version of it. In any case, both Mr. Kelly and his wife are devoured with anxiety about this brother, who seems to have been a bit of a scapegrace all his life."

There was no time to say more then, as we found that, by hurrying we could catch the 1:05 train to Pashet. We found Mr. Edward Kelly at Wood Cottage, a pretty little house on the outskirts of Saltashe Woods.

shape and was pronounced good by the Court.

Judge is a member of the State Fair Board, and while they have been renting sprinklers in the past, the Board

lead being discovered at Miami, Okla. He went there and obtained several options from Indians. Luck again

STATION

Corn, per bushel
Oats, per bushel
Butter, per pound
Eggs, per dozen